

# Refugees in Uganda:

## Improving Safety & Agricultural Productivity in Northern Uganda

By Jennifer Marcy and Holger Wagner

The Acholi inhabitants of northern Uganda have always been among the most politically and economically marginalized in Uganda. For the past 18 years, this area has experienced civil war and insecurity as a result of the activities of the rebel Lord's Resistance Army (LRA)—one of the most brutal military insurgencies active today—and the efforts of the Uganda People's Defense Forces (UPDF) to defeat them. It is estimated that the LRA has abducted 15,000 children to serve as soldiers, manual laborers, and sexual slaves, and the LRA's campaign of terror in northern Uganda has resulted in massive displacement, disruption of communications, transport and trade links, and has depressed agricultural production. By 1997, the vast majority of people from the Gulu, Pader and Kitgum districts of northern Uganda Acholi subregion had been relocated into internally displaced persons (IDP) camps, which are home to between 300,000 and 500,000 people.

In order to promote self-sufficiency and decrease dependency on international food aid, ACDI/VOCA launched the Rural Economy and Agriculture Production (REAP) project, which began in April 2003. The goal of the project, funded by the U.S. Agency for International Development, is to improve the food security of the more than 17,000 people living in the Palenga IDP camp in Gulu district by increasing agricultural productivity and revitalizing the local rural economy. These efforts aim to prepare beneficiaries for eventual resettlement in their home villages.

### Cash-for-Work Road Rehabilitation

The cash-for-work road rehabilitation component revitalizes the local economy by facilitating safer movement in the area, increasing access to available agricultural land and infusing cash into the community through payment for labor. Every two months a new labor force of approximately 240 people is employed to help meet the target of rehabilitating 80 km of roads in the immediate area. Beneficiaries are chosen through a lottery system that improves the chances of an equal number of men and women participants in the program. A new program to inform beneficiaries of the importance of savings and encourage them to save one-third of their earnings began in February 2004.

The 19 km of roads that have been rehabilitated to date are already having a profound impact on residents of Palenga. Before the REAP project, old roads were overgrown with plant life, providing

ready cover to rebels. With the roadways cleared and the brush in the overgrown, abandoned fields surrounding the camp cut down, many IDPs whose homes are close to the camp are able to return home during the day to gather firewood and harvest extra food in their own fields. The new roads have also led to anticipation in the community that once the residents resettle they will be able to carry out increased commercial activity as a result of an improved road network.

### Improved Farming Techniques

ACDI/VOCA is improving agricultural productivity and strengthening the local agricultural economy by demonstrating and promoting improved farming techniques and encouraging farmers to take a business-minded approach to their farming.

For demonstration purposes, 20 participants, called “contact farmers” from Palenga have been selected and trained by five ACDI/VOCA technicians to provide leadership, training and technical assistance on



Palenga residents work on a new maize crib for their community.

by 100 families, each of which will receive a 2.5 acre parcel. The goal is to reintroduce communal farming methods while incorporating



Residents work to clear the roads surrounding the Palenga Camp. The old roads were overgrown, providing ready cover to rebels. With the roadways cleared and the brush in the overgrown, abandoned fields surrounding the camp cut down, many IDPs whose homes are close to the camp are able to return home during the day to gather firewood and harvest extra food in their own fields.

100 small demonstration plots of rice, beans, millet and maize. The contact farmers then opened their lands so other farmers could get hands-on experience implementing new techniques, including using improved seeds, intercropping and row planting. Other demonstration plots will be used for cultivating fruit trees.

In addition to the demonstration plots, 250 acres of land have been designated as a communal plot to be farmed

modern agronomic techniques that facilitate large-scale production. To date, 103 acres have been cleared and planted with maize, millet, rice and beans. Additionally, 25 pairs of oxen and 25 heifers have been procured for future plowing and will be given to farmers working on the communal plot.

The pinnacle of the program for participating farmers is the training in post-harvest handling techniques and in farming as a business, which encourages farmers to view agriculture as a sustainable business and to shift from subsistence farming to farming for profit. The REAP project strives to create a business-minded group of farmers

who are able to plan, produce and market their crops based on productivity and profitability. This training also encourages collective work and teaches basic business skills. The farming-as-a-business approach is supported by the post-harvest handling training, which focuses on reducing losses, ensuring high quality and utilizing available technologies such as maize cribs for drying. A new warehouse is being built for collective storage and bulk sale of the maize crop from the communal plots.

With less than one year of work accomplished, REAP has experienced tremendous success in Palenga. For the first time in years, many IDPs have an opportunity to do dignified work, earn money and make decisions for their families. Demand to participate in the program is high, and over 1,000 people have already benefited from the training provided on the demonstration plots, giving hope that their eventual return home will result in even greater self-sufficiency and prosperity.

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